

# Germany Staking Blood of Thousands in Desperate Gamble on Western Front

## 2,418,000 TEUTONS FAIL TO SMASH BRITISH ARMY IN GREATEST OFFENSIVE

### SUCCESS HANGS IN BALANCE AS ALLIES RECOVER

By WILLIAM BELLOC.

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The great German offensive still hangs in the balance as a write. There are three elements which, in spite of all the information that has come, are still unknown to us: elements which only the decision of the battle will allow us to appreciate, and which must determine the issue of the great conflict.

The first of these is the rate of the enemy losses. We know that he has already (by Sunday night) had to feed into his attacking forces far more than twelve but probably less than eighteen divisions out of his reserve, although only four days of the great struggle had then passed. In other words, he had in four days eaten up in his re-enforcements more than a third and nearly a half of his original attacking force. But we will not know the battle is over—perhaps long after the battle is over—until the proportion of loss he withholds his divisions and has thrown in fresh men. This is the first and most important fact in the whole struggle, because if the German's expense in life does not warrant the result which he attains, his desperate gamble has been lost. He is undertaking a truly gigantic expense in blood, pressing his attacks almost without regard to cost, and with a single eye to a very rapid decision.

The second element is the defensive strength of the British forces, which has been shown so far by the still unbroken defending line, and which will continue to be shown by success in keeping the line unbroken and thus bringing the German drive to a gradual stop.

The third element is the action which may be taken with the great allied reserve armies. These have not yet begun to come into play and are awaiting their moment for such use as the high command may think fit.

Upon these elements victory will depend.

Characteristic of the Actual Front.

The front which the enemy had chosen for his attack has certain characteristics which we must grasp before going any further in the discussion of this action, for our understanding of those characteristics depends on our ability to comprehend the whole vast battle.

First—it is much the widest front, providing for much the most extended operations of any campaign in the history of this war. Its whole development in a straight line was not less than 16,000 yards, or somewhat over forty-three miles. Compared to the front of the front, it was more like fifty miles. The reason so large a sector was chosen is that previous experience has shown the futility of the attacking party of any partial breach of the defending line upon a narrow sector; and further, that over so large a stretch of territory the changes of finding some weak place or places here and there, which might be utilized to broaden out a narrow breach into a wide rupture were considerably increased.

Second—The ground chosen is the driest of all that held by the British between the Valley of the Oise and the North Sea. There is here much less of the impediment to action which comes from marshes, flooded grounds, and the numerous intersecting streams which characterize the line above Ypres, for instance. An exceptional period of dry weather, lasting for many weeks, had increased the value to the enemy for his offensive of this natural feature, which, with the good luck which has become proverbial for the Germans in the matter of weather, as affecting both their attack and defense, the ground continued during all the first days of the attack, and is yet unbroken.

We must mention, however, in this connection, that another feature of the weather has not been favorable to him. This is the dense mists, unusual in this territory at this time of year. Though they may have helped him in concealing his concentrations, they have retarded his opportunities for attack in the morning, especially the second and third days of the main operation, hampering his aircraft service, as well as direct observation of field and artillery positions.

Third—The British alone were selected to bear the weight of the blow. It was not divided, as some had expected it would be, between the French and the British. The enemy in this matter is calculating upon the fact that the British had improvised so very great an army in so short a time, and that this army might therefore lack homogeneity; he has argued that the British officers and men have been trained largely for trench fighting on the offensive, and would be less able on the defensive, especially less prepared to meet conditions in case he should succeed in breaking through the trench systems and reaching the open warfare. He is counting also on the fact that the specially heavy demands upon the British manpower, due to the necessities for ship construction for the navy, and for the industrial work which Britain does for the whole alliance, might weaken the power of the British forces. There is also perhaps a political element in this choice, which we cannot gauge—some miscalculation of moral effect, some such miscalculation as the British has made more than once in the course of these campaigns.

Fourth—Much the most important feature is the geographical position of the long line of the Western front of the sector chosen by the German general staff. It was the southern half of the British line between the British and French armies and thus to separate them, and in case of distress to either, prevent efficient co-operation and relief.

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units, faced the British line, and not less than seventy-five stood ready to deliver the shock between the Scarpe and the Oise. Of this number forty of the best were selected for the initial blow and the remainder for "feeding in" to the advanced lines as their predecessors grew exhausted from losses and the strain of fighting and had to be withdrawn for rest and reorganization.

Forces Available for the Operation.

The establishment of a German division at present is, of course, much less than it was in the early part of the war, though the units used in this attack have probably been somewhat swollen lately by special recruitment from the best of those used upon the eastern front. But if we estimate each division on an average as having 7,000 bayonets, with a total complete strength, including a very large proportion of artillery, of 12,000 or 13,000 men, we shall not be far wrong. This would give us, then, the following figures:

The total German forces in France and Belgium, from 2,232,000 to 2,418,000 men.

Available for active operations, from 1,920,000 to 2,080,000 men.

Opposite the British, 1,152,000 to 1,312,000 men.

Available for the attack, from 900,000 to 975,000.

Used in the first drive, from 480,000 to 520,000.

Available at first for re-enforcement, from 420,000 to 450,000.

Used for re-enforcement within the first four days (as mentioned in the opening of this article) from 200,000 to 250,000.

Remaining available for re-enforcement, from 150,000 to 200,000.

It will be observed that the uncertainty of this calculation, multiply toward the end, so that no very definite idea can finally be reached as to the exact amount of reserves remaining, but it is evident that they have been exhausted very rapidly.

Details of the Great Offensive.

With these preliminaries we may now take up the details of the fighting, which are becoming clearer, after the confused reports of the early days of the offensive. The great German attack opened an hour before dawn on Thursday, March 21, in the form of a series of simultaneous attacks on the British line.

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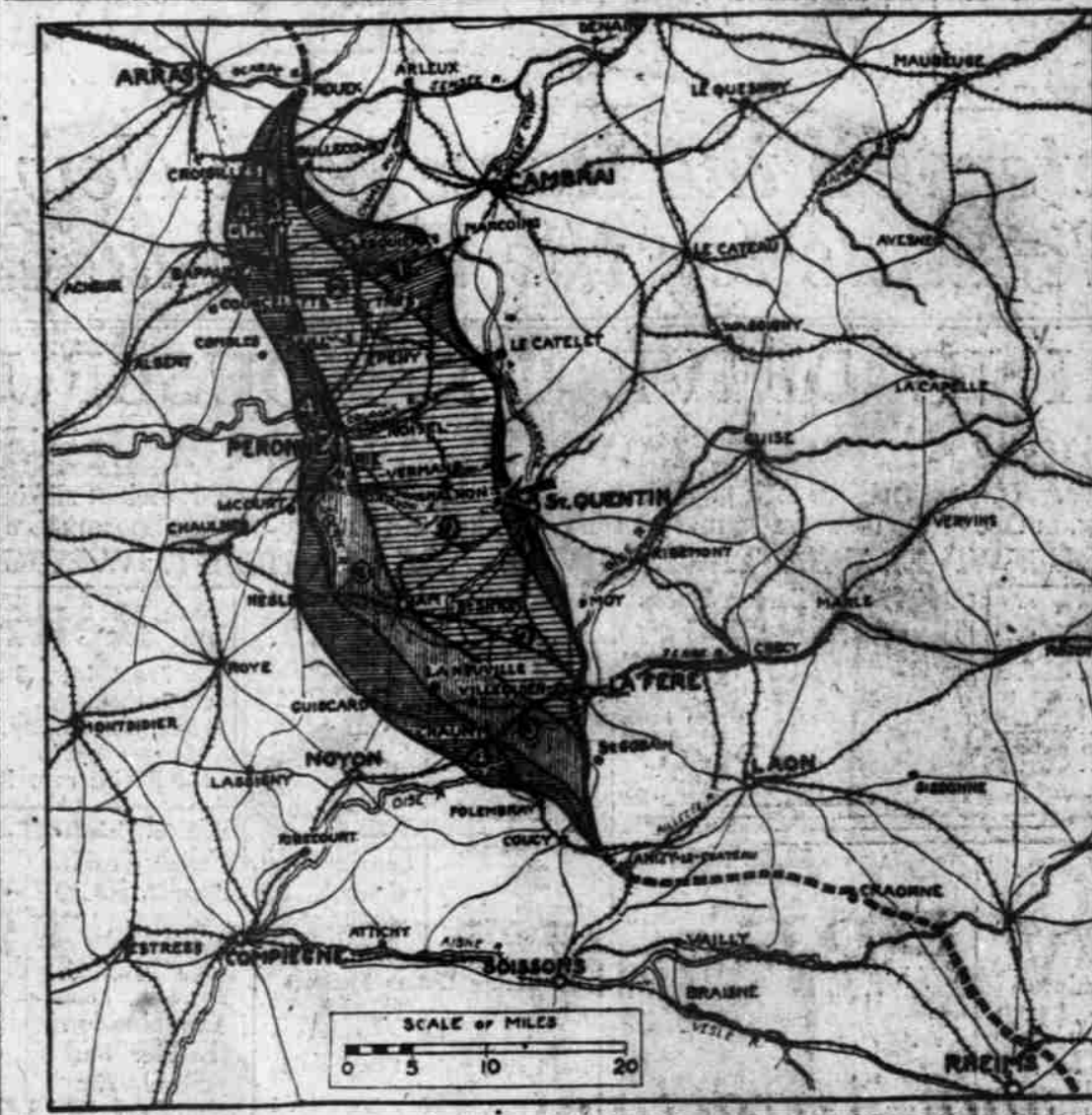
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The heavy solid black line shows the front on which the Germans attacked on Thursday, March 21, the broken line indicating the extension of the front to the north and south, the latter being held by the French. The shaded area (1) marks the German advance on the first day. The heavy black arrow shows where the British line was pierced on Friday afternoon, and the white area (2) is the territory abandoned by the British in consequence of the break. The battle line on Saturday morning standing on the western side of that area. By Sunday morning the British had retired across the area (3), and by Monday afternoon to the line on the western side of the area (4).

In this war of big guns. There was a far greater delivery of shells to each mile of front and to each hour than had been seen before even at Passchendaele.

Though the artillery bombardment was intense, it was short. The last hour was principally filled with the use of gas shells, especially aimed at the batteries of the defense line, and at points of concentration immediately behind it. At the same time ex-

ceptionally heavy work was done against the defensive barbed wire entanglements by trench mortars, which were pushed up to the extreme front trenches of the German lines.

After three and one-half to four and one-half hours of this preparation, the infantry was launched, and the terrific pressure, which has at the moment of writing continued almost unintermittently for four days, began to be exercised upon the whole

of the front which had been chosen by the enemy for his attack.

The first day's fighting—that of Thursday—resulted in far less than the enemy had expected, as we know by captured documents. He attempted to cut off the bulge, or salient, which faced the town of Cambrai, and failed. He attempted at the same time, with eight divisions, to exercise a decisive pressure upon the St. Quentin district. He there com-

pleted his attack, and the British line was pierced on Friday afternoon, and the white area (2) is the territory abandoned by the British in consequence of the break. The battle line on Saturday morning standing on the western side of that area. By Sunday morning the British had retired across the area (3), and by Monday afternoon to the line on the western side of the area (4).

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